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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/30/2011
TAGS: [KPAO PREL OA ALJAZEERA](#)
SUBJECT: DCM CONVEYS USG CONCERN OVER LEBANON CONFLICT
COVERAGE TO AL JAZEERA

REF: DOHA 923 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a courtesy call with Wadah Khanfar, Al Jazeera Network Director-General, DCM conveyed USG concerns about the channel's coverage of the recent Lebanon conflict. Khanfar said November 1 is the expected launch date of Al Jazeera English channel and that a replacement for himself as manager of the Arabic channel would not be named until the end of the year. End summary.

¶2. (U) DCM, accompanied by PAO, made a courtesy call on Wadah Khanfar, Director-General of the Al Jazeera Network (AJN) and Managing Director of Al Jazeera Arabic. Highlights of the conversation included:

Al Jazeera coverage of the Lebanon conflict

¶3. (C) DCM mentioned that the USG had serious concerns about Al Jazeera's coverage of events in Lebanon, sometimes related to reporting inaccuracy and sometimes to the inflammatory nature of the coverage. "At times the correspondents appear to be, not reporting the news, but participating in it," DCM noted. Khanfar reiterated that AJ takes questions of accuracy seriously and that it is policy that any mistakes made should be corrected. With regard to tone, he said, the question is less clear-cut. The most strenuous attempts to be objective and report both sides cannot overcome the strength of the mood on the Arab street in the case of Lebanon, he said. The fact is, the majority of people interviewed on the ground were critical of American policy in "not restraining Israel" and this was inevitably reflected in the coverage. He noted that, in addition, where the correspondents were Lebanese, it became very difficult for them to maintain objectivity. DCM then asked if AJ attempted to correct this bias by importing non-Lebanese correspondents. Khanfar said AJ had done this when it was still reporting from Iraq for that very reason (all but one of its correspondents were non-Iraqi), but that in Lebanon's case, the conflict broke unexpectedly during summer vacation period, making it difficult to replace correspondents on the ground at short notice.

Al Arabiyya's coverage of the Lebanon conflict

¶4. (U) Khanfar said that, in his judgment, Al Arabiyya lost its way early on during the conflict by attempting to follow

the official Saudi line (critical of Hezbollah) in its coverage. "In terms of statistics and viewership, they lost completely, and Al Jazeera won," said Khanfar.

Launch date for Al Jazeera English (AJE)

15. (U) Khanfar said the currently scheduled launch date for AJE is November 1 but that he was not sure whether it would be met. He blamed the French video technology company Thomson for the delay. He said AJ had made a "strategic mistake" in opting to use high-definition technology for AJE. The technology is new and not stable, he said, noting that the company began to develop the needed software only after the contract was signed. They had contracted to complete the contract "in April, and now it is August," he complained. He also noted that Al Jazeera has now signed two contracts for distribution in the United States, and expected to sign more during the coming weeks. But he could not give an idea of the level of penetration AJE expects to attain before the launch or say in which markets AJE would initially be available. AJ has also signed a contract for broadband delivery so that viewers who can't receive cable service will be able to view AJE via computer.

Khanfar's replacement at Al Jazeera Arabic

16. (U) As he has said previously (reftels), Khanfar said he expected that a replacement for himself as manager of Al Jazeera Arabic would be named at the end of the year, after the launch of AJE. He said he thought the replacement would likely be a Qatari. Note: One name that has been mentioned by observers is Qatari national Ahmed Al Kholafi, who is an AJN board member. Al Kholafi currently occupies a senior

position in the Ministry of Public Works and is much occupied with preparations for the Doha Asian Games. Rumor has it that although Al Kholafi does not have media experience, he would represent a compromise in the issue, which has pitted Khanfar against other AJN Board members, notably Amrit Mahmoud Shammam (reftels). End note.
UNTERMEYER